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ABSTRACT

The Literacy Volunteers of America-Danbury, Connecticut, is a nonprofit community organization that provides free instruction in English for those to whom English is still largely a foreign language. For 10 years it has also provided free instruction in reading and writing for English-speaking persons whose education has not provided these skills. The community served is a 16-town area with a largely small-town, suburban population of about 180,000. The staff consists of 2 full-time employees, 3 part-time employees, and 12 volunteers. Volunteer tutors sometimes number more than 200. Students come from 35 different countries, but almost a third are Spanish-speaking. Seventy-nine percent are learning to speak English, and 30 percent are learning to read. The organization is funded by contributions from individuals, companies, and United Way; grants from some of the cities served; and grants from the Meserve Foundation and the Episcopal Church Women of Connecticut. In 1987, 565 students participated. The instruments used to assess student progress are pretests, Literacy Volunteers of America's English as a Second Language Oral Assessment, the READ test, the Slosson Oral Reading Test, and the Nelson test. Volunteer tutors are trained during eight preservice workshops and a yearly inservice course. The single program aspect that is best at motivating students is using one-on-one teaching directed at student-identified goals. Both objective and subjective measurements are necessary to determine whether these goals are met. Projects are frequently co-sponsored with other agencies. (CML)

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WHO IS LEARNING TO READ

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by

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LITERACY VOLUNTEERS OF AMERICA-DANBURY, CT

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The Literacy Volunteers of America-Danbury, CT is a nonprofit community organization that provides free instruction in learning English for those to whom English is still largely a foreign tongue. For 10 years it has also provided free instruction in reading and writing for English-speaking persons whose education has not provided these skills.

Started in 1977 as the Danbury Reading Academy, it became an affiliate of Literacy Volunteers of CT in 1978, part of Literacy Volunteers of America, Inc. A board of directors chaired by Mary Kiniry of Danbury formulates plans and policies, which are implemented by a staff of two full time and three part-time employees and 12 volunteers each of whom have a job description.

The community we serve is a 16 town area in western Connecticut with a largely small town suburban population of 180,000. Its center is Danbury where our office is located, which has approximately 70,000 persons many of whom (perhaps 30%) are first or second generation immigrants from all over the world.

79% of our students are learning to speak English and 30% are learning to read. They come from thirty-five different countries. Almost a third are Spanish speaking. In the past we have served large numbers of Southeast Asians who settled in Danbury from 1978 on and continue to arrrive today. They currently make up 3% of Danbury's population. This year a wave of Brazilians has come to town, drawn by large numbers of jobs that pay well. 43% (242 persons of our 565 students) in 1987-88 were employed when they registered. We have a special program called

United Way

Partially funded by Bethel, Danbury, New Milford, Newtown, Redding, and the Meserve Memorial Fund

Uno a Uno that is directed at preventing dropouts among in-school Hispanic youth.

Our four major goals are:

1. To teach reading and English as a second language through volunteer efforts to teenagers and adults in the Greater Danbury area.
2. To provide our volunteers with a strong interactive organizational structure.
3. To strengthen relationships around the issue of literacy between Literacy Volunteers and other organizations.
4. To secure the funds necessary to support the organization at all levels.

A copy of objectives and strategies is attached. (See Appendix A)

We are partially funded by grants from the Cities of Bethel, Danbury, New Milford, Newtown and Redding, the Meserve Foundation and the Episcopal Church Women of CT. We receive generous contributions from a number of public spirited corporations and individuals in the Danbury area, as well as the United Way of Northern Fairfield County. In 1989 we will receive a Venture Grant from the Housatonic-Shepaug United Way, Inc.

Our volunteers also come from a 16 town area with 52% living in towns around Danbury, and 48% in the city. In 1987-88 we had 342 who tutored one or more students, 33 of whom also helped to run the organization. Thirty-six others assisted in some administrative capacity but were not active tutors. None of them received any pay. Twenty tutors taught small groups of between three to seven people. The majority taught one on one in the community, 35 tutors were prison inmates at the Federal Corrections Institute in Danbury.

I would catagorize our program as largely one-on-one, volunteer, community based immigrant/ESL, although we do have a prison and a classroom program.

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We had 565 students last year. The breakdown of their length of time in the program is inclosed. (See Appendix B)

We assess their progress by pretesting every student upon registration. All members of our paid and volunteer office staff are trained to do this, as well as six other volunteers who test in the office regularly and in the community by appointment when the need arises. We use four instruments.

1. LVA's English as a Second Language Oral Assessment - for all foreign born levels 1-4

   This instrument has four sections with questions indicating functional skills of listening comprehension, vocabulary development, life skills and functional grammar. It has a very useful and time saving feature. When the student does not succeed with one level, the test is discontinued.

2. LVA's READ test for all reading students. This test also is stopped when the student begins to fail. It has 3 sections - one on sight words, one on basic reading skills and one on reading paragraphs and comprehension.

3. The Slosson Oral Reading Test is used to determine grade reading level for advanced foreign born students in order to enable tutors to select appropriate reading material.

4. Nelson Test - a standardized reading test which can be administered in 35 to 40 minutes which we use to determine grade level above grade 5.

After instruction has begun a tutor does a post test every six months or after 50 hours of instruction, which ever comes first. If the tutor prefers, the student may be post tested by office staff or another volunteer.

We train tutors to assess progress by devoting one of the eight preliminary workshop sessions to this process. Every reading tutor is given a READ test booklet and is given practice with it. In addition we offer a daytime and an evening inservice every year as a refresher course on testing. Tutors do not ever administer the Nelson test. That is done almost exclusively by paid staff. However, every tutor receives a copy of the test along with the student registration form when he/she receives their student.

Centralizing pretesting has worked very well for us for these reasons:

1. It has strengthened the placement process by giving us information that allows a better choice of tutor for student needs.
2. It has enabled us to group students by level when setting up small groups.
3. It has tripled the percent of students pretested whose scores were reported.

Using a standarized test for levels above 5 has helped, also. While it is LVA policy to accept students who are levels 0 to 5 only and to refer upper level students elsewhere, in the Danbury area there is no other porgram at all for 28 out of 52 weeks of the year. For 24 weeks there is a program in Danbury in the days only, thus excluding students employed days. In two of the 15 other towns there is an evening reading class, but again for only two 12 week sessions. Out affiliate, therefore, set a policy of accepting students up to 8th grade level. We felt we needed to test entry levels and progress above level five as well as identify accurately who was proficient enough to be rejected.

Centralizing the data collection process has also helped us. Previous to 1987-88 we used a large group of volunteers who contacted seven to 10 other volunteers to collect hours monthly, to collect test scores and to give support and encouragement. As we grew to over 200

volunteers it became unwieldy to use this system, particularly since two new volunteers were added to the group every month as a new group of tutors was trained. In 1987 we changed to one paid employee who contacts all tutors and keeps our records and reports. This has helped us to share information, to encourage tutors to post test, and to receive information quickly about which tutors and students need to be rematched for some reason.

The single aspect of our program that is best at motivating students is using one-to-one teaching directed at student identified goals and needs.

We find out what students want to accomplish in three ways:

1. Asking them when they register
2. Asking them when they first meet with a tutor
3. Constantly listening to expressed desires and needs as tutoring progresses.

Depending on the goal, it may be very easy or very difficult to measure student achievement. Both objective and subjective measurements are necessary. For example, if a student wants to register to vote, get a job or become a citizen, it is clear when these tasks are accomplished. If he wants to read better, or speak English at work, it is less clear. One of our measurements of success is the completion of a life skill. Such a skill may be small such as writing his name, or large, such as being able to read the newspaper. The achievement of these tasks is determined by the tutor. The pitfall in this process is that not all tutors understand what we mean by life skill, and therefore don't report them to us as data. If you talk to a tutor for 30 minutes in person, you will hear many of these life skills accomplishments described. Our problem seems to be one of communication, which is compounded by the fact that we train volunteers monthly and request one years service from them. We are also understaffed. We have two full time and three part time paid staff members.

The effect information gained from assessment has on our program is:

1. It helps us make program decisions.
2. It helps us identify where tutor training needs to be strenthened.
3. It helps us communicate our effectiveness to funding sources.
4. It helps us confirm our already rather strong inclination to believe in ourselves and our mission.
5. It helps u identify how to work with students before we even meet with them.
6. It helps us to select students who do not need our services.
7. It enables us to place students of the same ability in groups together.
8. It helps provide information to us that we use to advocate on behalf of our students with the school system and the community as a whole.
9. It provides information on needs of groups of people that helps us to design special projects for the future.

Students follow up is done almost exclusively by tutors, due to a dire shortage of staff time and an enormous waiting list. When a student stops, we try to find out if they want to continue with another tutor. Many times when they don't wish to continue then, they will contact their own tutor for help in the future. Some tutors form lasting friendships with students, that extend to family interaction as well.

We do not follow up on those who "graduate" in any way. Actually, we would not use that word, but rather use the word complete or leave. Re-entry is possible at any time. Students who actually do graduate from high school or junior high sometimes come back or write to tell us what they are doing. More importantly, they send their friends or family to study.

We connect with as many local groups as we have energy and time to contact via our newsletter which goes out eight times a year, news releases monthly, feature articles four times a year, and a speaker's bureau that contacts clubs for speaking engagements on a regular basis. Our student recruiter has eight agencies which she contacts regularly.

As director I participate in a number of groups personally which help to increase networking and cross-referral. For example, last year I was a member of the Danbury Public Schools Dropout Prevention Task Force and a subcommittee which, among other things, published a 37 page booklet entitled "Contacts" of services in our area that help to prevent dropouts and serve them and their families. I attend quarterly United Way Directors meetings. Our president attends all meetings of DOVIA - Director's of Volunteers in Agencies.

We try to secure co-sponsorship of our projects to include other agencies and organizations in planning and funding. For example, our Uno a Uno program is co-sponsored by three other agencies: the Spanish Learning Center, the Association of Religious Communities, and the Danbury Public Schools. Written end of the year reports help to keep funders and co-sponsors in touch with progress. Unfortunately post-testing is a very weak link in this particular project.

In the future we hope to open up our office hours to two evenings a week when students could be registered and pretested. We plan to continue to work on the concept of life skill goal setting and achievements. By 1990 we want to develop the concept of competency based education in our affiliate. Literacy Volunteers of CT is working on this in other affiliates at the present time.